The King in Your Midst
Zephaniah 3:14-20

Rev. Tobias Riggs
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Good morning. My name is Tobias. I'm the Associate Pastor here at Christ the King, and it's my privilege once again to open God's Word with you this morning and to bring our time in Zephaniah to a close. If you've been with us for a while, you've probably noticed we don't often draw attention to the church calendar around here other than Advent and Easter, although we did this morning with the devotional. But it occurred to me that the last couple of times I've been scheduled to preach, it's landed on one of the bigger days of the year. Three weeks ago when I preached on Zephaniah 1, it was All Saints Day, the day after Reformation Day or Halloween, depending on who you ask. And this morning, it's Christ the King Sunday. And if that's not worth mentioning, given our name and what we're going to read this morning, I don't know what is. But in between those two Sundays, Penny's taken us through chapter 2 and the first half of chapter 3. And like chapter 1, there's a lot of judgment in those passages. But last week, as Penny put it, the book has finally started to take a turn. And we come this morning to where that turn leads. God's people are told to sing, and the Lord returns as the King of Israel. And if chapter 1 is one of the hardest passages in Scripture, I think what we're about to read may be one of the most joyful. So let's read together Zephaniah chapter 3 verses 14 – 20:

> "Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem!
> The LORD has taken away the judgments against you; he has cleared away your enemies.
> The King of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst; you shall never again fear evil.
> On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: "Fear not, O Zion; let not your hands grow weak. The LORD your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing. I will gather those of you who mourn for the festival, so that you will no longer suffer reproach.
> Behold, at that time I will deal with all your oppressors. And I will save the lameand gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth.
> At that time I will bring you in, at the time when I gather you together; for I will make you renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth, when I restore your fortunes before your eyes," says the LORD." (ESV)

Friends, this is the word of the Lord. Let's pray.

O Father, we bow before you. We thank you for your word. We thank you that we have been able to sit under the words of Zephaniah. What beautiful, powerful, challenging words they have been. And this morning we ask that you by your Spirit will open our eyes and open our ears, that you will soften our hearts. Help us to hear what you would have us hear this morning, Lord. Help us to hear the promises that you give. Help us to see who you are, what you have done, and what you call us to as your people. And may the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.

Well, like many of y'all here today, my family and I love C.S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia*. And there's a part in the Magician's Nephew, the story about how Narnia began, that I've been thinking about this week alongside Zephaniah. In it, two children, Diggory and Polly, have been tricked by Diggory's Uncle Andrew into using some magic rings. And they find their way into another world and a city called Charn. And Charn is dead. They wander through enormous empty courtyards and broken towers under an old dim red sun, and there's no sound anywhere, no voices, not even a bird's song. All they can hear is the thump-thump of their own hearts. And soon they learn what happened there. The queen of that world, Jadis, rather than lose a war to her own sister, spoke what Lewis calls "the deplorable word," a single word that ended every living thing but herself. She'd rather end her world than lose it. And then after a disastrous detour through London with Jadis, wreaking havoc at every turn, in a brief stop in the wood between the worlds, the rings carry them off again, this time somewhere else entirely, with the queen, Diggory's uncle, a cabbie, and his horse, Strawberry, all along for the ride. And where they are is nowhere. They can feel something cool and flat beneath their feet, but they can't see anything. There's no light, nothing but darkness and cold and stillness. The cabbie, trying to keep everyone's spirits up, suggests that they sing a hymn, and he starts in on a harvest hymn about Thanksgiving, all about the crops being gathered in. Lewis doesn't name it, but I bet it's the one we sang this morning to open the service, "Come Ye Thankful People, Come."

It's a funny moment. I mean, it's hardly the right place for a song about crops and gathering in when nothing's ever grown. But then somewhere out in the dark, a deep earthy voice begins to sing, the most beautiful thing Diggory has ever heard. And then other voices high above them begin to join in. All at once, the sky is blazing with stars, and it's the stars who are singing. And soon after, the darkness fully fades, a brand new sun rises triumphantly, and the children can finally see who's been singing. It's a magnificent lion, and everywhere his song goes, a new world is springing to life. And what strikes me coming back to it this week is they were never dark. When the cabbie started up his hymn, he thought he was singing into nothing, but someone was already there with him long before there was anything to see. And I think Zephaniah has been taking us down much the same road. When we began three weeks ago, he gave us a glimpse of a world a lot like Charn, with nothing left alive in it. "I will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth." The Lord said, "man and beast, birds and fish," the creation of Genesis running backward. And the reason was that God's own people had given their hearts to other gods while keeping his name on their lips. Even Josiah's great reform, as good as it was, couldn't change their hearts, and it couldn't stop the approach of that dreadful day.

Just a few verses before this morning's passage, the fire of the Lord's jealousy is still burning, and all the earth shall be consumed. Zephaniah saw all of it coming, and yet he saw something else too. Think again of the turn we heard last week. No sooner has he warned of the judgment than he says in verse 9, "at that time I will change the speech of the peoples to a pure speech, that all of them may call upon the name of the Lord. The fire that was going to consume is also the fire that purifies." And when it's done its work, God says, "I will leave in your midst the people humble and lowly. They shall seek refuge in the name of the Lord." In chapter 1, Jerusalem had stopped seeking the Lord, and in the end they didn't even talk to him anymore. Now there's a people in her midst who run to him, and it's to that people that Zephaniah now says, sing. But notice when he says it, nothing's happened yet. Josiah is still on the throne. Babylon hasn't come. The city hasn't fallen, much less been razed again. Everything Zephaniah's promised is still out in the dark. Listen to how he begins in verse 14.

“Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion. Shout, O Israel. Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem.” That's four commands stacked one on top of the other, and none of them holds anything back. Sing aloud, shout, rejoice, exult. The first command Zephaniah ever gave this city was be silent before the Lord God. Now he tells them to make all the noise they can, and notice what he calls them. In chapter 1, they were just the inhabitants of the Earth, and the Lord's hand was stretched out against them. Here they're daughter of Zion, daughter of Jerusalem. It's family language, and it's tender. So what's happened? How does a city that was told to hush, a city the Lord's hand was stretched out against, come to be called his daughter and told to sing? Well, it isn't anything they've done. Zephaniah tells us in verse 15 that it's what the Lord has done, and notice how he says it. “The Lord has taken away the judgments against you. He has cleared away your enemies.” He speaks as if it's already happened, but it hadn't. Jerusalem hadn't seen any of it yet. The judgment of chapter 1 was still on its way. John Calvin saw what Zephaniah was doing here. He says “the prophet speaks to them as though they were already enjoying that happiness which was yet far distant.” I think he's right.

God's word is so sure that Zephaniah can speak of the future as if it were the past, but what the Lord has done isn't the only reason they're told to sing. Listen to the rest of the verse in verse 15. “The king of Israel is in your midst.” He hasn't done all this from a distance and then left. He's come back to live among them. Of course, Jerusalem already has a king. Josiah is still on the throne, and he was a good king, maybe the best Judah ever had, but even the best king couldn't save the city from what was coming. What Jerusalem needed was the Lord Himself among them, and yet up to now in Zephaniah, that's been a frightening thought. Back in chapter 1, the Lord said He'd come with lamp in hand. He'd go street by street searching out the men who'd settled on their dregs, the ones who decided He would never do anything at all. Y'all, He'd be in their midst then too, and that's the terror of it. There'd be nowhere to hide, but now here He is again, the same God in the same city, and He hasn't come to search them out. He's come to be their king. He's cleared away their enemies. He's taken away their judgment, and He can do what Josiah never could do. He can keep the city safe, and so Zephaniah says, “You shall never again fear evil.” You shall never again fear evil. It's a beautiful promise, but it isn't always easy to hold on to, is it?

We know the Lord is with us, and we believe it, but the troubles around us have a way of crowding that out, whether it's a hard diagnosis or a child who's wandered, and after a while we start to lose hope. Zephaniah knows that, and so in verse 16, he urges them to hold on. “Let not your hands grow weak,” he says. That's how Scripture talks about losing heart. It's what happens when the hard news keeps coming, and you run out of the strength to keep trusting what God has said. Friends, God doesn't promise that the hard news will stop coming. What He gives us instead is Himself. The King is in our midst. He isn't watching from a distance, waiting for things to be put right before He comes near. He's in it with us, and because He's here, we don't have to be afraid. So when we sing every Sunday, we're not just keeping our spirits up like the cabbie in the dark. We're singing to the King who's already here about what He's promised to do, because His Word is as good as done. And in the very next verse, Zephaniah tells us what the King is doing in our midst, and it might be the last thing we'd expect. “The Lord your God is in your midst”, he says, “a mighty one who will save. He will rejoice over you with gladness. He will quiet you by His love. He will exult over you with loud singing.”

Notice how that verse ends. “He will exult over you with loud singing.” Jason DeRucci points out that this is the only place in the Old Testament where the Lord is said to sing.

Israel sang all the time, Miriam and Moses by the sea, David with his harp, the whole book of Psalms, but we never actually hear God Himself sing except here, and He's singing over Jerusalem. Why? Why would God rejoice over a city like that? These are the people who bowed to the stars on their rooftops, who swore by Milcom, who'd stopped asking Him anything. Well, I think the answer goes back to the scroll Josiah's men found in the temple. When it was read, he heard the curses, and he tore his clothes. But if he kept listening near the end of Deuteronomy, he would have heard something more. Moses told them that after the curse had fallen, and they'd been scattered among the nations, the Lord would gather them again and circumcise their hearts. And then he says, "the Lord will again take delight in prospering you as He took delight in your fathers." You see, this was always where God meant the story to go. The curse was necessary, yes, but it was never meant to be the last word. And I think that helps us hear the line that comes between His rejoicing and His singing. "He will quiet you by His love." Most of us probably picture something like a mother quieting a crying child, and there's something to that. But it's a hard line to translate, and some Bibles take it another way. The NIV says, "in His love He will no longer rebuke you."

You see, it isn't only that He quiets us. He's gone quiet Himself. Remember what drove the day of wrath in chapter 1, the fire of His jealousy? We said it was the jealousy of a husband whose wife had given herself to someone else. Well, here is that same husband, but the accusations have stopped because the judgments against her have been taken away. And so he has nothing more to say against her, and she can finally rest in His love. But I wonder if for some of us it's easier to believe that God has taken away the judgments against us than to believe that He would sing over us. Most of us could tell you we're forgiven, even on the days we struggle to feel it. But if you asked what God's face looks like when He looks at us, I'm not sure many of us would say joy. We might say patience, or that He's putting up with us. And so we come in on a Sunday morning a little like a student on the day the papers are turned back, knowing full well our work isn't good enough, embracing for the disappointment on the face of the teacher we wanted most to please. I felt that way myself. But that isn't the God of verse 17. He isn't merely tolerating His people. He's singing over them. And not because they've finally become the people we're singing over.

Zephaniah gives no reason but His love. The same love that wouldn't let them go when they were unfaithful is the love that rejoices over them now. He sings over us the way that voice sang in the dark before there was anything to see over a world it was about to make. In the last verses of the book, tell us where that song is leading. "I will gather those of you who mourn for the festival," the Lord says in verse 18, "so that you will no longer suffer reproach." I didn't mention it then, but this book began with a gathering. When God said in chapter 1, I will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth, the word He used is built on the same word, gather. It's what a farmer does when he clears a field, and it's the word Israel used for harvest. In fact, one of their great feasts was called the Feast of Ingathering. And now the God who said He would gather up and clear everything away, He says He'll gather His people in. The same God, the same word, only now He's bringing in the harvest. And what's more, He's gathering His people to a feast.

Three times a year Israel was meant to go up to Jerusalem for the great feasts. Whole villages would set out together and sing the Psalms of ascent along the road. And for days the city would be full of families eating and drinking in the presence of God. They were the happiest days in Israel's life. Now imagine being cut off from all that, carried off to a foreign country,

or left behind in a ruined city where no one goes up anymore. In Lamentations 1, the prophet says “the roads to Zion mourn, for none come to the festival.” That's the grief Zephaniah has in mind here. But he also speaks of reproach. “When Jerusalem fell, the nations around her laughed.” Psalm 79 puts their taunt into words. “Where is their God?” They said. It's one thing to lose the feast. It's another thing to be mocked for it. And yet those are the people God is singing over. And His song is leading them back to the feast. And listen to who He's gathering in, in verse 19. “I will save the lame and gather the outcast.” That's an easy line to pass over. But think about what it meant to be lame in Israel when the feasts came around. The way up to Jerusalem was on foot and over the hills. And the lame were the ones who couldn't make the trip. They were the ones most likely to be left behind. And God says, “I'll gather them.” I think Jesus had something like this in mind when He told the story of a man who threw a banquet. When the guests He'd invited wouldn't come, He told His servant, go out quickly to the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in the poor and crippled and blind and lame.

Friends, that's us. We're the ones He sent for. Apart from Christ, none of us can make the trip. Too often we're tempted to think we need to get ourselves sorted out before God will gather us in. That we need to stop limping before we're allowed on the road. But that isn't what Zephaniah says. God doesn't wait for us to get ourselves there. He comes back for us and gathers us Himself. And when He does, He takes away our shame. He says, “I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth.” The people the world laughed at become the people the world talks about. Not because we've made something of ourselves, but because of what God has made of us. When the world sees the lame sitting at the feast, it sees what kind of God He is, and they praise Him for it. In the last verses, the last words of the book, God turns to His people and makes them a promise of their own. Listen to what He says. “At that time I will bring you in. At the time when I gather you together for I will make you renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth. When I restore your fortunes before your eyes, says the Lord.” I love that – “Before your eyes.” All this time they've been told to sing before they've seen. But one day God says they'll see everything He's promised.

And yet that still leaves a question Zephaniah never answers. How could the God who said He'd come in Jerusalem with lamps come to live in their midst as their king? How could He do that? For a long time His people had to wait. The city fell just as He said it would. Some of the exiles did come home and lay the foundation of a new temple. And Ezra tells us that the old men who remembered the first one wept when they saw it. It was a far cry from what Zephaniah had promised. And even when the pages of the New Testament opened, God's people are still waiting. They're still singing in the dark. But then one spring, centuries later, Jerusalem filled up for the feast again. John tells us about it in chapter 12 of his gospel. It was Passover and pilgrims had come from everywhere. And when the crowd heard that Jesus was coming to the city, they took palm branches and went out to meet Him, crying, “Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the king of Israel.” And Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it. John says, “just as it is written, Fear not, daughter of Zion. Behold, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt. King of Israel, fear not, daughter of Zion.” John puts all three side by side, and there's only one place in the Old Testament where they come together. The passage we read this morning, the king Zephaniah promised had come into his city. And when the crowd cried, “Hosanna,” which means “save us, we pray,” they were calling on the mighty one who will save. And yet John tells us even his disciples did not understand these things at first.

They were singing before they could see. They didn't yet know what kind of king Jesus was or what it would cost him to save them. Within the week, the king who rode into his city to the crowd's Hosannas was led out of it to a cross. And there the fire of God's jealousy, the fire Zephaniah said would consume all the earth, fell on him. That's how the judgments against us were taken away. The Lord didn't simply set them aside. He bore them himself in his Son. And that's how the king can live in our midst without coming as our judge. And the cross is where the gathering begins too. Jesus had said, “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” And ever since he's been drawing people in, the lame and the outcasts, the ones who couldn't get themselves to the feast, people from every nation on Earth, people like you and me. And when he draws us in, he takes away our shame, just as Zephaniah promised. But Hebrews tells us something more. It says Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers, saying, “I will tell of your name to my brothers. In the midst of the congregation, I will sing your praise.” He isn't ashamed to stand among us and sing. Zephaniah told us the Lord would be in the midst of his people singing over them. And here is Jesus, the King of Israel, in the midst of his people too, singing with them, leading their praise to the Father.

In Jesus, the God who sings over us has come to sing with us. So friends, this morning we sing the way Jerusalem was told to sing. The judgments against us are gone, and the King is in our midst, but we don't yet see everything put right. We do live in that long stretch between the promise and the day. And yet the King has come into his city, and he has been lifted up, and he has been raised from the dead, and he will come again. And on that day, we'll see it before our eyes. Until then, we sing before we see. And you know, I don't think that Cabby was so far off. He stood there in the dark, singing about a harvest safely gathered in, in a place where nothing had ever grown. And it sounded like the wrong song, but it wasn't the wrong song. It just was early. And if he'd kept singing to the last verse, he'd have come to the lines we sang this morning. “Even so, Lord, quickly come to thy final harvest home. Gather thou thy people in, free from sorrow, free from sin.” That's Zephaniah's song too. The God who once said he'd sweep away everything has promised to gather his people in, and he will. And when we sing about it, we're never singing alone. The King is in our midst, singing with us and over us. Let's pray.

Almighty God, we bow before you. We think of what we have heard in this book, of your power and your majesty, of your holiness and your justice, and of your love and of your joy. Thank you, Lord, for your word. May it run deep within us. We ask, Lord, that you will continue to buoy us by it, to strengthen our faith, to give us confidence in you, and to rest in your love. And we pray this in the mighty name of Jesus. Amen.